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ABSTRACT

What kind of meaningful learning goes on when an introverted and intuitive traditional professor imparts his knowledge to an extroverted student of the new wave generation? In a project exploring how teaching personalities influence student learning, a traditional professor of literature and a "new wave" (defined as characterized by improvisation and subjective symbolism) female student were interviewed. The traditionalist emphasis is to understand the intentions and achievements of the author. The subject, Professor A, felt responsible for bringing order to the chaos of ideas within the student's mind after earch reading assignment. Judith, Professor A's "new wave" student, was concerned with what the literature meant. The traditional ideology that the teacher knows the "real" meaning of the text--that the student's personal response has little value for the student's learning experience--caused tension to surface with Judith and thus gave direction to the project. David Bleich and others believe that this tension between traditional methodology and the students' desires to share thoughts and feelings can be resolved in favor of reader response centered teaching. A reader-centered course that also stresses theoretical and critical issues about interpretation directs students toward issues of the readability of texts, the influence of culture, history, and gender relations. Teachers of literature can communicate ideas which are valid, as well as passions and interests, without making rigid, narrow-minded demands, and make the literature, whatever literature it is, exciting and relevant for today's students. (RAE)

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Dale Norris

Traditional Teacher / New Wave Student

Presented at the 1988 CCCC Convention, St. Louis, Missouri

When Dr. Reagan proposed this project of exploring how teaching personalities influence student learning, I chose a traditional, literature professor as my subject because he had been my mentor during five years of graduate work in literature. My initial observations and interviews with professor and student led to this question: What kind of meaningful learning goes on when an introverted and intuitive traditional professor imparts his knowledge to an extroverted student of the new wave generation? To more adequately explore this learning situation, I attempted to define the "traditional" teacher of literature. Many of us are traditional teachers to some degree, so I felt I needed to clarify the degree to which my subject, Professor A could be positioned in the traditional school. The traditional college literature teacher which Professor A is a member is most often a male who has been educated in the "canon" of English and American literature. He believes that there is a standard for excellence in literature, that certain works are recognized over time as being excellent by the collective opinion of scholars and other learned persons, and that the function of the college is to impart and instill these higher cultural values upon the student. Traditional literature teachers believe that certain brilliant authors have created texts that illuminate the human qualities,

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emotions and truth that are innate in all people across culture or the historical moment. The emphasis for the traditionalist is to understand the intentions and achievements of the author. On a more individualized level, Professor A is a scholar, a gentleman who one might imagine stepped straight out of the eighteenth century. A true wit, immaculately groomed, the epitome of taste and decorum... control and reason - these 18th century words exemplify my subject.

Professor A. is organized, sensitive to the literature - lectures were always prepared - well conceived. He delivered the information needed to understand the literature - to take the test. He told me he felt responsible for bringing order to the chaos of ideas within the student's mind after each reading assignment. How would a extroverted "new wave" student of the 80's respond to such a personality?

"New Wave," according to Webster's is a term coined about 1960, originally describing a cinematic movement characterized by improvisation, abstraction, and subjective symbolism, often making use of experimental photographic techniques. More recently, there has come to be a musical form known as "new wave," characterized by roughly the same qualities.

What, therefore are the characteristics of the new wave student? Think of the influences of the past 20 or 30 years. What is significant? Civil rights - womens' rights - minority rights - no longer the blind acceptance of the dominance of the white male establishment - television, Sesame Street - video games

- Star Wars - VCR's - CD systems, big screen TV's - hand held calculators which know more math than any of us - the turbo charged, fuel injected automobile. Perhaps most important is the item that has completely changed the lives of every one of us in the 1980's - the amazing, ubiquitous integrated circuit, that powers the PC's, that gives students of today instant relief from many of the manual drudgeries of even 10 years ago, and grants them license for improvisation - the individualized response to the learning situation - i.e. spelling, errorless typing, complete redrafting or retyping to make revisions. I selected a free spirited, rather punkish girl named Judith who was the opposite of Professor A. in all aspects of the Myers Briggs personality test. While Professor A was introverted, intuitive, feeling and perceptive, Judith was extroverted, sensing, thinking, and judging.

How would Judith, my "new wave" female learn from a traditional professor whose teacher centered methodology inevitably grows out of his own need for control in the classroom.

When interviewed, Judith began by enthusiastically reporting. "He's good - I mean really good, because if I didn't know what the story meant when I went in, I knew exactly what it meant when I left. She added that she did not always need to read the literature because, " He so thoroughly delves into the meaning that if I take good notes I can still ace the test." Getting the correct interpretation of the reading, however, required being at

each lecture.

What the literature meant was Judith's concern, and, from our interviews, it became apparent that she had been trained to buy into the idea that important meaning of the literature was somehow hidden in the art, or was some thing outside herself - something Professor A. knew, but certainly not anything within her own experience.

Later in the semester, as Judith became more comfortable with me, she voiced some discontent. "I get so restless. Every class we sit and listen - take notes. I wish the class could talk more. I thought I understood what motivated the character, but I felt foolish after listening to his interpretation." Judith perceived and responded to literature in her individualistic way, yet she was discovering that personal responses to the text must occur outside of the classroom. In other words, Judith's personal response to the text was deprivileged - Professor A's interpretations would be accepted as correct. The traditional approach isolated the meaning of the text from Judith's personal experience because any emotional response might interfere with her intellectual judgement. Feeling, after all, is traditionally viewed as unwieldy, private, and altogether preoccupied with the self.

That traditional ideology that the teacher knows the "real" meaning of the text - that a student's personal or emotional response has little meaning or value to the student's learning experience, caused tension to surface with Judith and thus gave me

direction in the project. "I want to talk about what "The Birthmark" means - I know a man just like Alymer" Judith felt frustrated because she knew the teacher was knowledgeable, and always well prepared. What she couldn't articulate was that traditionally, thought is primary to a traditional approach; it is considered to be manageable, social, disinterested. Further, the master's responsibility was to direct that thought toward understanding THE meaning.

The more deeply I contemplated the issues involved with this project, the more I faced examining my own teaching personality - my own sensitivity to students' reactions to texts. I asked myself, do I privilege criticism and interpretation according to what I bring to the text from my own life experience? The answers seemed so obvious; we can't escape our life experience, our obsessions. Do we then insist that our choice of interpretation must be THE interpretation? Do we isolate the students' private experience from the text, separate it out and exclude it from the classroom?

This tension between traditional methodology and the students desire to share thoughts and feelings, perceptions and associations dramatizes a problem which David Bleich claims to resolve - in favor of reader response centered teaching. Six months after Dr. Reagan's project, I participated in a workshop with David Bleich. My conclusions after taking part in this experience were - to the far right there is teaching methodology which could be represented by Professor A. - rigid - teacher

centered lecture - where the professor's interpretation is privileged because he is the master. Students listen and glean knowledge from the master - without question.

To the far left, however, I felt uncomfortable with the thought that all boundaries of art are lost - the works become nothing but the student's individual psychology - his or her personal problems and obsessions transfer to whatever he or she reads. So the work is nothing but a prompt to the student's psychological makeup. Both of these approaches seem wrongheaded to me.

The rigid approach stifled Judith's creativity and self discovery, even her thinking because she constantly felt the overwhelming need to think and work within the narrow boundaries of the master. A student might even feel guilty or stupid if he or she thinks outside of the master's approach. Yet the left wing approach becomes amorphous and could give students an absurd idea of art. There are no standards, no boundaries and without boundaries, what do we have? At this point in my project, Dr. Reagan suggested I read
Kathleen McCormick's, article "Theory in the Reader: Bleich, Holland, and Beyond."

McCormick agrees that completely associative response restricts students to what they already know. A reader centered course that also stresses theoretical and critical issues about interpretation directs students toward more interesting issues of the readability of texts, the influence of culture, history, and

gender relations - away from the traditional approach where they are simply told the meaning of a text and asked to regurgitate lecture notes onto an essay exam - or compose a literary critique where the emphasis is on someone else's idea of what the text means. For example, drawing on the responses of two students to the poem "To His Coy Mistress," McCormick demonstrates subjective responses with emphasis on culture, history, and gender relations.

"Coy Mistress," remember, describes a poet lover's attempts to persuade his lady to go to bed with him. He argues that time is running out and she will not be beautiful forever. They must live for the day. One woman responded:

"Who would believe all this rot about the worms crawling in and the worms crawling out. I knew when he started out with all those compliments that a "but" was coming - and sure enough. I can't believe that anyone in the seventeenth century would have bought his argument and I know that nobody would today. He acts like he's all concerned about thge woman in the beginning when he's really only concerned about himself. What an insult to women, and it doesn't say much for men either.

A male student responded quite differently:

I often find myself in the predicament of these poets. I have my "lines" too. But even though these guys' lines are more clever than mine, I don't think that they would work any better than mine do! In some ways, this poetry shows men that relations between the sexes haven't changed much over the centuries" (840).

McCormick contends that this kind of initial response males

it possible to devise ways of integrating more traditional, historical, or philosophical material as well as more contemporary issues of literary theory into the classroom without sacrificing the spontaneity of students' initial responses and without reifying the text or the reader (837). Obviously this poem speaks to students in various ways - different responses are formed by gender differences as well as age and experience difference.

My composition students discovered meaning in "The Birthmark" as science fiction. They also shared thoughtful observations of the marriage relationship of Alymer and Georgianna. Some found Alymer a man who aimed at perfection but always fell just a little short. Others found it the story of a mad scientist who presumed to be God. Several thought Georgianna too submissive, knowingly risking all for love - to please her husband.

I am more convinced that one extreme - the traditional teacher centered methodology where the correct interpretation is given by the teacher, or the other extreme - a totally emotional, reader response centered experience is unacceptable - yet we cannot sacrifice self discovery and spontaneity.

We have certain duties as teachers of literature - to communicate our passions and our ideas as best we can through whatever style we possess to students who live in 1988 and who see the world through 1988 eyes. We can communicate our ideas which are valid, our passions and interests without making rigid, narrow minded demands. We can make the literature - whatever literature it is, exciting and interesting and relevant to 1988 students.

Dr. Reagan's project began by demonstrating that classroom methods grow out of a teacher's personality needs and that these methods have bearing on how we relate to various personality types. For me, the project was the beginning of my moving beyond my traditional training to question what works best for meaningful learning experiences for students.

Works cited:

McCormick, Kathleen. "Theory in the Reader: Bleich, Holland and Beyond," College English 47 (1985): 836-850.